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The Priority of Education

By Joshua Lederberg

AS EDUCATION is the keystone of civilization, it is axiomatic that we can scarcely invest too much of our resources in teaching the young. We have learned the rewards of scientific analysis and therefore we should perceive that we must subject our educational policies to the most searching experimental inquiry in order to learn how to teach properly.

Education as a panacea for our social ills has been a philosophical dogma at least since Plato. This is the same as saying that bad education is the cause of them, but there is much more enthusiastic conviction than scientific evidence to support such a theory.

Since we are now dedicated to equal opportunity for our citizens as a matter of government policy, ending disparities in educational advantages commands a high priority. Project Head Start is the label of a budget item, almost half a billion dollars of new obligational authority, intended to support new initiatives in compensatory, pre-school education for children from culturally deprived home environments.

The funds are intended to reach 187,000 pre-schoolers for a full year and more than half a million in summer programs. In comparison, there is a total elementary school enrollment of about 37 million pupils and a total annual expenditure for them of about \$25 billion.

THE THEORETICAL objective of Head Start has been to attempt to break the vicious cycle of cultural deprivation with early intervention. The "deprived" home environment insufficiently or inappropriately stimulates the child for his later adapta-

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tions to the dominant culture. Having failed to secrete the necessary intellectual enzymes, he does not digest the standard educational fare. Becoming an educational failure, a dropout, he lags culturally and economically and creates the same toneless but noisy environment for his own offspring.

The pre-school year might be the most critical period for social intervention, giving, according to the theory, the highest benefit cost ratio in compensatory education.

Many programs of social action might have a flimsier theoretical basis than this one. But Head Start is especially vulnerable to scientific criticism for at least two reasons: its pretensions for a quickly detectable effect on the exposed children, and its accessibility to presumably quantitative tests like academic grades or reading achievement.

Recently, Head Start has been attacked on the basis of preliminary studies of its first efforts. For example, Dr. Max Wolff found that pre-kindergarten programs in New York had positive effects that faded after the experimental children had been mixed for a time in regular classes. According to further newspaper reports, Prof. Urie Bronfenbrenner has criticized some details of the methodology of this evaluation.

Meanwhile, releases from the OEO head office explain that fading effects were expected and that no special treatment can compensate for the general inadequacies of school follow-through programs.

THIS IS MOST regrettable, because Head Start has the potential to make some of the most important education experiments of our time. It is evasive to simply explain away this fadeout. The special argument for pre-school intervention programs was the concept that the children were at a critical age.

Some cynics might retort that the real argument was that the Establishment had full control of the rest of life; pre-school was the most accessible trough to be filled. More thoughtful critics support the hypothesis that the early period is critical, but wonder whether the four-year-old is not too old—already too engrained by a submissive, hostile, unself-confident subculture.

Perhaps the main emphasis of any early intervention program should be on establishing self-esteem and motivation to perform in a confusing color-mixed world, as a necessary prerequisite to continuing cognitive development.

In any case, the great mistake is to regard Head Start as an established program rather than a medley of experiments. Many, perhaps most, of these will fail to pass examination on their relative merits and cost-effectiveness.

By the same argument, the whole Head Start program will be a failure if its funds and human efforts are dissipated in a fragmented crazy-quilt of incomparable trials beyond systematic evaluation.

It must make many compromises to the realities of politics, funds and physical facilities. Fortunately, it is attracting the attention of research-minded psychologists across the country, and with their energetic involvement and some public patience, some clues may be found to better paths through the maze.

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